

# Green Acton Draft Version

## Town of Acton Sustainability Policy

2017-12-01

### PROLOGUE

#### Environmental History

The Town of Acton has a noteworthy history of environmental action, including:

- preservation of considerable open space over decades
- community action to form Acton Citizens for Environmental Safety in the late 1970s to advocate for the strongest possible mitigation of contamination of Town wells by W.R. Grace
- the work of the Acton Stream Teams to monitor our waterways and work for strong stormwater and pollution protections
- the launch of Green Acton as an umbrella, community-based environmental group
- the Town's creation of the Green Advisory Board
- designation as a MA Department of Energy Resources Green Community in the inaugural year of the program
- establishment of an Energy Manager position for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District
- multiple awards for the Acton-Boxborough Regional School District's environmental initiatives (see Appendix A)
- the inclusion of environmental concerns in the Town's most-recent Master Plan, Acton 2020
- myriad successful proposals for initiatives in energy conservation and efficiency
- solar projects in schools and on municipal properties, including the Transfer Station
- launch of local mass transit
- reduction of our carbon footprint by multiple stakeholders
- increase of residential solar panel installations through Solarize Acton
- a SMART/PAYT system and Swap Shop for the Transfer Station, reducing the volume of trash residents generate by millions of pounds annually

Town staff, Selectmen, and many residents have, through their work on these initiatives, developed significant knowledge and experience, and have, likewise, contributed to the drafting of this policy.

## PREFACE

The Town of Acton acknowledges that we are facing intertwined environmental crises locally, regionally, and beyond, and that the Town's choices and actions can contribute to these problems, or can be leading examples of ways forward in solving them.

**Intertwined environmental crises** include current and future:

- impacts of the climate change emergency
- threats to water quality and quantity
- loss of habitat for diverse species
- development of greenspace, leading to land use conversion and deforestation
- loss of agricultural land critical to a secure food system
- loss of greenspace necessary for a healthy society
- the production, consumption, and accumulation of toxic materials and products

These challenges reinforce each other in complex ways, and have their origins in the deeply held human habit of seeking short-term gains, rather than long-term benefits. This misguided practice is incompatible with the inescapable fact that the planet has finite capacity to provide resources and absorb wastes. Dealing with these challenges must be done thoughtfully: with humility and a willingness to learn; with attention to the dangers of unintended consequences; and with a commitment to living within limits.

**Sustainability** means allowing the needs of the present to be met in ways that don't eclipse the same for future generations. In a sustainable system, energy and materials flow in balanced cycles over the long term. Enacting sustainability means avoiding use of finite, non-renewable resources and creation of waste that has no future use. Executing a comprehensive sustainable approach requires that decisions consider long-term human needs and environmental well-being, as well as mitigation of harms.

**A successful sustainability strategy** will include influencing and collaborating with stakeholders at multiple levels — local, regional, state, and federal — and engaging community members, organizations, businesses, institutions, and other governmental entities.

**The intentions of this sustainability policy are to:**

- create a town-wide platform for enactment of practical solutions — with measurable goals — to our intertwined environmental crises

- set the stage for continued collaboration between the Town, residents, and state and community partners
- apply to all sectors in the Town in achievement of sustainability goals
- support a diverse, equitable, and healthy local economy, promote the well-being of people, and safeguard the health of the planet — all of which strengthen and reinforce one another, and constitute an approach commonly referred to as the “triple bottom line”
- use scientifically sound data, ideas, and strategies so that our solutions are effective and forward-looking
- advocate for actions that align with this policy, including those that lie outside of the direct control of the Town
- recognize that: the environmental crises we face are intertwined; the climate emergency is global and requires our attention to greenhouse gas emissions; water quality and quantity are critical local issues; and a key tool for addressing these is the leveraging of the Town’s land use authority

## POLICY

Recognizing the responsibility to be robust and effective in implementing solutions, the Board of Selectmen of the Town of Acton establishes the following Policy on Sustainability:

1. Every official action of the Town of Acton, including policies, budgets, bylaws, and purchasing decisions, will advance sustainability.
2. The Town will develop specific, measurable goals to address all aspects of sustainability. These goals, as well as the plans to implement them, should involve the Board of Selectmen, Town Manager and staff, Town boards, committees, and commissions, community groups, and members of the public.
3. Annually, the Town Manager (or the Manager's designee), will present to the Board of Selectmen (BoS) a report on progress toward these goals, and on plans for the year ahead, which could include, for example, bylaw changes, program development, capital projects, collaboration/partnerships, education campaigns, administrative policy changes, creation of committees, contracting of consultants, staff training, or hiring staff.
4. The BoS will hold one or more public hearings annually for review of and comment on the Town’s sustainability efforts. Evaluation of projects should include:
  - a. metrics on progress toward identified sustainability goals

- b. financial analysis of capital-intensive projects that considers the best value for sustainability by comparing the long-term costs of taking the action versus those of failing to take the action
  - c. use of the Precautionary Principle, which asserts that the introduction of a new product or process whose ultimate effects are disputed or unknown should be resisted; the principle implies that there is a social responsibility to protect the public from exposure to harm, when scientific investigation has found a plausible risk
  - d. consideration of the needs of those unprotected by relative personal and/or institutional power or privilege
5. This policy should be reviewed by the Board of Selectmen, Town Manager and other staff, and community stakeholders at least once every five years, as new facts, analyses, and understandings emerge.

## RECOMMENDED SUSTAINABILITY GOALS

- achieve 100% renewable power town-wide
- achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions
- conserve water quantity and safeguard water quality for community and ecosystem needs
- decrease and eventually eliminate the use of toxic materials and products
- avoid permitting of buildings or business operations that unnecessarily harm our environment
- maximize the protection of undeveloped open space, and optimize greenspace in developed areas
- protect intact natural communities, and restore damaged ecosystems

## APPENDIX A

The following are some existing Acton policies, processes, and initiatives that would align with this iteration of the Sustainability Policy:

### GENERAL

1. adoption of the Stretch (Building) Code
2. Green Community designation
3. support of the Acton-Boxborough Farmers Market
4. establishment of Town Community Gardens program
5. Acton WildAware program
6. BoS designation of town-wide Sustainability Policy as #1 goal for 2017–2018

### MATERIALS/WASTE/RECYCLING

1. Board of Health ongoing work to require safe handling of toxics in permitting activities
2. Transfer Station improvements:
  - Pay As You Throw/SMART program
  - Swap Shop
  - ongoing enhanced recycling options
  - food waste composting at TS and several of our schools and municipal properties

### ENERGY/CLIMATE

1. anti-idling ordinance for Town vehicles (state law: <http://doc.acton-ma.gov/dsweb/Get/Document-20952/37t0rz5g.pdf>)
2. five rounds of energy efficiency projects, in schools and municipal properties, funded with Green Communities grants (lighting, HVAC, weatherization)
3. LED street light replacements
4. co-sponsorship of Solarize Acton campaign
5. zoning bylaw changes to permit large-scale solar (as well as some tree-clearing protections)
6. municipal CCA program: Acton Power Choice (Acton Power Choice Standard and Acton Power Choice Green)
7. BoS vote to sign on to Climate Mayors' Letter and WeAreStillIn.com Pledge of Support for Paris Climate Agreement

### TRANSPORTATION

1. fuel-efficient vehicles policy
2. replacement of several gas-powered Town vehicles with gas-electric hybrids
3. support for pilot and ongoing local and regional public transportation initiatives (CrossTownConnect)

4. Complete Streets policy
5. sidewalk construction program
6. bicycle parking zoning bylaw
7. support for BFRT (Bruce Freeman Rail Trail) and ARRT (Assabet River Rail Trail)

## SCHOOLS

1. engagement of students and staff in the Power Down energy conservation programs
2. compostables and recyclables collection in school cafeterias, with consequent significant reduction in trash volume; and introduction of compostable lunch trays to replace polystyrene (Styrofoam®) trays
3. multiple awards for a broad range of sustainability initiatives:
  - Green Ribbon District Sustainability Award from US Dept of Education
  - K–12 District Recycling Award from MassRecycle
  - Excellence in Energy and Environmental Education award from Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
  - U.S. EPA Energy Star awarded to multiple school buildings
  - Green Flag international award to ABRHS from National Wildlife Federation and Eco-Schools USA
  - national and state awards to ABRHS, Conant, Gates, and Douglas from National Energy Education Development Project (NEED)

## LAND AND WATER

1. invasive plant removal program for Town conservation lands
2. adoption of local CPA funding mechanism for protecting open space
3. support for protecting undeveloped land; recently protected parcels: Wright Hill, Simeone Farm, 80 Wood Lane (next to Arboretum), farm and meadow lands next to Rt. 2, Anderson Land to extend Bullette conservation land, etc.
4. Wetlands Protection bylaw
5. stormwater bylaws
6. approval at 2017 Town Meeting of water evaluation and protection resolutions

## APPENDIX B

The following is a partial list of sustainability plans that have either already begun, or could start in the coming year.

1. complete greenhouse gas emission inventory
2. progress on implementing the three water-related 2017 Town Meeting resolutions:
  - a. long-range study of Acton's water needs, risks, and protective measures
  - b. accord with neighboring towns on equitable access to water from Nagog Pond
  - c. working with the MA Legislature to affirm Acton's right to withdraw water from Nagog Pond
3. active monitoring of the status of mitigation efforts at the two Superfund sites that impact Acton's drinking water; advocacy for thorough efforts to intercept toxic pollutants that threaten that water; and work with the Acton Water District to ensure the safety of Acton's drinking water
4. creation and early implementation of nontoxic land and turf protocols for all public and school properties
5. development and passage of a tree protection bylaw
6. development and action on a plan for net zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from Acton's activities, town-wide
7. development and adoption of a policy of net zero GHG emissions for all new municipal and school buildings
8. extension of fixed bus route (re: frequency and reach)
9. installation of municipally owned and publicly accessible electric car charging stations
10. planning for (and beginning implementation of) safe bike connections between the Assabet River Rail Trail and the Bruce Freeman Rail Trail
11. completion of gas leak survey and data analysis for all town roads
12. research into how the Town can reduce and eventually eliminate the use of fossil fuels and fossil fuel infrastructure for HVAC services to buildings
13. creation of Town purchasing policy that mandates recyclable or compostable materials for short-term uses
14. creation of policy to limit single-use plastics (e.g., plastic bags, water bottles)
15. completion of the roll-out of recycling options for Town recreation areas
16. alteration of Town policy to eliminate (or lower) minimum-parking-space requirements for private businesses
17. protection of more open space
18. establishment of requirements for recycling and composting by apartment buildings and condominium complexes (via regulation of the activities of private trash collection companies operating in Town)

19. participation in regional assessments and surveys measuring Acton's sustainability progress as compared to that of other towns
20. adoption of a method to measure the carbon footprint impact of proposed development or land use policy changes
21. initiation of public discussions toward establishing definitions and policy related to "public necessity" development (e.g., very-low-income housing, firehouse), as contrasted with other development
22. establishment of a transfer tax on property transfers to fund important triple-bottom-line sustainability work
23. exploration of the Town's land use authority to reduce the town-wide carbon footprint
24. establishment of a condo/apartment purchase program, so as to reuse existing housing for very-low income individuals — both to achieve the Town's 10% affordable housing goal, and to help meet the Town's triple-bottom-line sustainability goals